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Huddleston loses battle on CIA charter but wins praises on intelligence work

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WASHINGTON — In the last days of the Nixon administration, when the Church Committee in the U.S. Senate started investigating abuses of the CIA, Sen. Walter "Dee" Huddleston can remember going home "sick at my stomach."

"We found things that were horrendous, a massive abuse of civil rights, and the constitutional and legal rights of citizens," Huddleston recalled. "And it was done in a deliberate fashion."

The Kentucky Democrat had been in the Senate only two years. But Huddleston's interest in intelligence matters prompted then-Majority Leader Mike Mansfield to appoint the freshman senator to the special Church Committee,

named after its chairman, Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho.

Now, six years later, Huddleston is a veritable graybeard in the Senate on the nation's intelligence system. Only three senators — Huddleston, Joseph Biden, D-Del., and Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz. — have served continuously from 1974 on the Church Committee and its successor, the permanent Senate Intelligence Committee formed in 1976.

"We have seen more of the intelligence operation of the United States than any other individual, including the CIA directors, the presidents, the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Huddleston said in an interview last week.

Huddleston is close-mouthed about the many secrets he's seen. But, taking a broad perspective, he said there has

been tremendous progress in reforming the intelligence agencies since the Nixon years.

"There is no comparison now in the degree of responsibility with which our agencies are operating," he said.

Last week, however, Huddleston lost a long battle to bring more accountability to the CIA and other foreign-intelligence operations.

For the past two years, as the intelligence subcommittee chairman on charter legislation, Huddleston has led an effort to write a charter specifying legal restraints on the activities of U.S. intelligence agencies.

Such a charter has never existed. And there has been a reform movement

among some in Congress to put a tighter leash on the intelligence community since the abuses of the mid-1970s — the CIA assassination plots against foreign leaders, spying on domestic groups and the use of mind-altering drugs by U.S. agents.

Huddleston, working closely for many months with President Carter and intelligence officials, drafted a 171-page comprehensive charter earlier this year. The charter would not only have put restraints on the CIA, but it would also have allowed the agency to better protect its secrets and to act with greater freedom.

Last Thursday, as White House support began to weaken, Huddleston got the bad news from the Senate leadership — there was no way his charter legislation would get through the Senate this year. So Huddleston "very reluctantly" told his colleagues on the Senate Intelligence Committee that the charter effort would have to be scrapped.

The disappointed Huddleston, instead, presented to the committee a slim seven-page bill that could make it easier for the CIA to undertake covert operations and that could exempt the agency from many provisions of the Freedom of Information Act.

The barebones bill would also prescribe criminal penalties for a government official or former official who discloses the identity of an intelligence agent. And it proposes no statutory prohibition on the use of journalists, clergymen and professors as cover for CIA agents.

Huddleston said he would not blame the Carter administration for its lack of support in recent days on such issues as prior notice to Congress on covert CIA operations.

He noted that the crises in Afghanistan and Iran have changed administration and congressional attitudes in recent months about placing legislative restrictions on the CIA. To the contrary, he suggested, a mood now exists to loosen restrictions that currently exist.

Sen. Birch Bayh, D-Ind., chairman of the intelligence committee, praised Huddleston's efforts on the charter.

"I don't know how you can be too complimentary of Sen. Huddleston in his patience and persistence in pursuing the charter," Bayh said.

Last Friday morning, the day after the charter was put in mothballs, the first call that came to Huddleston's office was from former CIA Director William Colby. He said that Huddleston had "fought the good fight" and that he shouldn't be discouraged. Colby was a

frequent ally of Huddleston's in the fight for the charter.

During the past six years, Huddleston has come in contact with the major intelligence figures of recent history — CIA Directors Colby, James Schlesinger, Richard Helms, George Bush and Stansfield Turner. He's also dealt with such shadowy people as the enigmatic former counterintelligence chief James Angleton, who once described the spookish world of intelligence as a "wilderness of mirrors."

Huddleston, once a local broadcaster from Elizabethtown, has had access to much of the secretive, sophisticated spying apparatus of the intelligence community.

But to learn of it, he has had to go to special intelligence committee offices where secret files are kept. He has had to absorb the information in time-consuming sessions in the offices, for he can't take any files home with him, nor can he take any notes while he's there.

His own Senate staff isn't privy to any of the committee information. The senator has to rely on a committee aide who has clearance to deal with the highly classified material.

Huddleston, who operates on the assumption that his telephones are tapped by unknown people, said he never discusses sensitive matters on the phone. There are telephones available to him, Bayh and other committee members that scramble their conversations, making it impossible for a third party to understand what is said.

Occasionally, federal agents will "sweep" Huddleston's Senate office in an effort to detect hidden microphones. So far, none has been found.

The senator hinted that he may be watched by U.S. agents when he goes, for example, to a foreign embassy reception, which isn't often. He suggested that this could be as much for his protection — to warn him about certain people — as it is for the protection of the nation's intelligence secrets.

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During discussions on the comprehensive CIA charter, Huddleston said there has been a general misunderstanding on the part of the public and news media about the differences between intelligence gathering and covert actions.

"We weren't calling for any inhibitions on intelligence collection," emphasized Huddleston, who explained that such collection is done by electronic devices, satellites, individuals "and in a lot of secret ways."

On the other hand, covert operations, he said, "are designed to influence events in foreign countries and to do it in such a way that the hand of the United States is concealed. That can be accomplished by a news article in a paper

to virtually operating a war as we have done."

Covert actions, the Kentucky senator believes, are "very serious activities that should be taken only in extraordinary circumstances."

Huddleston wouldn't discuss whether the CIA participated in covert operations during the recent aborted rescue mission of American hostages in Iran.

One of the key questions still facing Congress this year is whether the White House will be required to give prior notice to the Senate and House intelligence committees about planned covert activities, except in extraordinary situations.

Huddleston's long service on the Senate Intelligence Committee, several aides say, hasn't been a role that necessarily helps him with his constituency back in Kentucky.

His other committee assignments — third-ranking member of the agriculture committee and chairman of both interior appropriations and small business subcommittees — have more political value.

His term runs out on the intelligence committee at the end of this year, but he could be reappointed if an exception is made by the Senate leadership. Then, because of the rotating membership on the committee, he would be chairman.

There is a long-shot chance that Huddleston might also be in line for chairmanship of the powerful agriculture committee next year. It would be a difficult decision, Huddleston acknowledged, if a choice is necessary.

A Huddleston aide, with a strictly political viewpoint, said the senator would choose the agriculture committee, regardless of how much he liked dealing with the clandestine world of intelligence.



Staff Photo by Barbara Montgomery

Sen. Walter "Dee" Huddleston
Close-mouthed about secrets